

**The Heart of the Matter**  
**Rev. David A. Morris**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
**May 8, 2016**

The religious stories about Mother Goddesses I shared earlier tell the people of each faith who they are, what their story is, why they exist. They speak about what is Holy, what I would call the deepest nature of the Universe. They describe how human beings are in relationship with that deep nature, that Ultimate Truth, the power that is the source of everything throughout the known Universe. They do all this with images, stories, poetic language and metaphors, all springing out of the culture that gives them birth.

We have, in these early years of the twenty-first century, other ways to look for knowledge about who and what we are. We use science now to study our physical universe, our own minds and bodies, to learn the history of our planet and the vast system of matter and energy in which it moves. We know things about the Universe and about ourselves which the ancient religious sages never imagined. This doesn't mean that Holiness has ceased to exist, nor does it mean that we no longer need to know what our relationship is with the larger reality within which we live and move and have our being.

Long ago, I worked as an editor on a college textbook for a course that was often called "Physics for Poets." I never took that class when I was in college; it looked too technical for me. So don't worry; I'm not going to try to explain how it is that matter at the smallest quantum level combines aspects of particles and waves, or why the Higgs Boson might explain how it is that objects which are mostly made up of empty space can have mass. But I do want to take you on a small and, I promise, very generalized excursion into something that contemporary physics seems to be telling us.

We know that matter is made up of atoms—particles flying around within a structure that's mostly empty space. We know that the matter and energy which we can see or describe and study directly makes up only a small portion of all that exists; most of our Universe is made up of dark matter and dark energy, which we call "dark" because, basically, we can't find it and we don't know much about it except that we think it must be there to account for how big everything is.

We know that the physical objects around us, including ourselves, are all made of elements like calcium, carbon, oxygen, helium, hydrogen—elements which came into being at the very beginning of the Universe, gathered into clusters, burst into flame, exploded everywhere and were reformed: star dust. We, the animals, the trees, the rocks, the planet and everything on it: All star dust left over from the birth of everything.

We know that life and consciousness have evolved on this planet, whether or not they have anywhere else, and have developed to the point where some of the star dust is now able to look through a telescope and describe what the stars were doing all those billions of years before they became, well, us. Gary Kowalski calls our study of the history which happened billions of years

before we existed “the recovered memory of the Universe.” In Carl Sagan’s beautiful words, we human beings are the Cosmos studying itself.

And here’s one last fascinating thing we have learned in our study: It seems that *relationship* is the fundamental nature of everything that is. Not things: relationships—between particles, between atoms, between molecules, between elements and entities and individuals and families and societies and planets and solar systems and galaxies—everything exists in relationships, from the smallest of things to the largest, relationships in relation with other relationships. You’ve probably heard the old story of the Westerner who was trying to undermine the ancient myth that the Earth is resting on the back of an elephant by asking what the elephant is standing on. A bigger elephant, he’s told, but then he asks again and again until finally his worn-down tutor says: “Look, there’s no use asking any more. It’s elephants all the way down.” Well, now it appears what’s actually true is that it’s relationships all the way down.

So if the nature of the Universe is relationship, the human expression of relationship is love. Love is the core of human nature, the place where human nature embodies the relational nature of the Universe.

In other words, those ancient mythologies are, metaphorically speaking, accurate. If you think about all those mother-goddess stories, the connection between humankind and the larger cosmic reality represented by the many different Goddesses and Gods in each one springs from the essential raw physical reality of creation; in each story the world we live in and we ourselves are formed and created within and with matter and energy drawn directly from the divine wholeness. The human relationship with the divine in these mythologies, and in fact our relationship with each other and with the rest of the living Universe as well, can never be broken, because it is part of the internal reality of our identity and of our world.

Relationships all the way down.

You might even say that love is the mother of us all: It’s the Power that gives us birth, the Force visible and invisible that binds us together, the Source that nurtures and sustains us, and comforts us in the face of loss and struggle.

This idea that love and relationship are fundamentally important is part of our religious heritage, going back long before the discoveries of contemporary physics. Between 1790 and 1961, when the Universalist Church in America and the American Unitarian Association consolidated, the Universalist side of our religious family collaborated to craft four different statements of faith, each one reflecting their evolving understanding. All of them declare that the fundamental nature of God is Love. The last one, called the Washington Declaration, was written in 1935; it puts it this way: “. . . we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-conquering Love.”

On both sides of our historic house, this religion we have is rooted in covenanted relationships, which means a mutual promise to *be* something and *do* something together. Relationship has long been the core of our religious tradition: Right relationship with one another, within and among our communities, with the wider human and natural world, and with the Ultimate Truth that grounds the Universe.

We don't claim one set of spiritual beliefs as the final truth everyone must agree to. Instead, we covenant to live in open and thoughtful community with one another, supporting, guiding, and learning from each other as we each search for a Truth that is constantly emerging, constantly evolving as human knowledge and understanding grows. We seek to create sustainable communities of love, because that's the best way for us to live. We work toward a just, equitable, and compassionate world, not because Divine commandments order us to, but because we are in relationship with all of humankind and with the whole fabric of life.

"Love is the doctrine of this church," an affirmation in our hymnal says: For us, that is the heart of the matter.

Of course, we don't always feel surrounded by love. In the stories of our own lives, in the world around us, love can seem far away, blocked, muffled, defeated. We can feel unloved and alone sometimes; strife and hatred can seem to dominate the world.

And yet love remains. Love remains.

Even when we think we have severed ourselves from every connection we have ever made in our lives, love remains; some ties that can never be broken are waiting for us to dare to pick them up.

When we have learned to fear that there is no one who will hear the truth of our life and not reject us, love remains; somewhere, someone is waiting for us to listen to them with respect and compassion, and to offer us the same in return.

When we are overcome by the feeling that our society is utterly dominated by those who demonize and marginalize others, love remains; in this very moment someone is speaking out, and someone is taking the risk of solidarity with the oppressed and the marginalized; right now someone else is awakening to the terrible implications of their own words.

Even when we have come to believe that greed and lust for power will drive humankind over the brink of extinction, love remains; someone is already at work on building new ways for us to live, and love for the earth is already giving someone the courage to change their mind and their habits.

We can always, always choose to turn toward Love.

Perhaps for you this is a joyful day, when life seems rich in the presence and the memory of love and full of delightful connections and possibilities. At such times it's a simple, rapturous delight to hear the voice of love calling us to reach out, to engage, to live in blissful relationship. These are times we should celebrate!

But the voice is there in harder times as well.

The loneliness in our heart is the voice of love calling us to reach out to someone who is also alone. The sorrow we can hardly bear is the voice of love calling us to open our arms to someone who is also grieving. The anger clouding our mind is the voice of love calling us to

feel our own hurt and see the pain of the one we are angry with, and to work toward healing us both. The desolation of our spirit is the voice of love calling us to offer someone a word and an act of hope.

If it's true that the very nature of the Universe is rooted in relationships, that the very nature of humankind is to love, then we are never alone, and the world is never lost to hatred. When we choose to turn toward love, we learn that we have been surrounded by it all along, that it is the very breath of life which sustains us.

Make channels for the streams of love, one of our hymns tells us. When we realize that each of us can be the channel through which love enters the world, then we know that we are always beloved.